Lafayette Historical Society NEWS
Enlightening Our Community

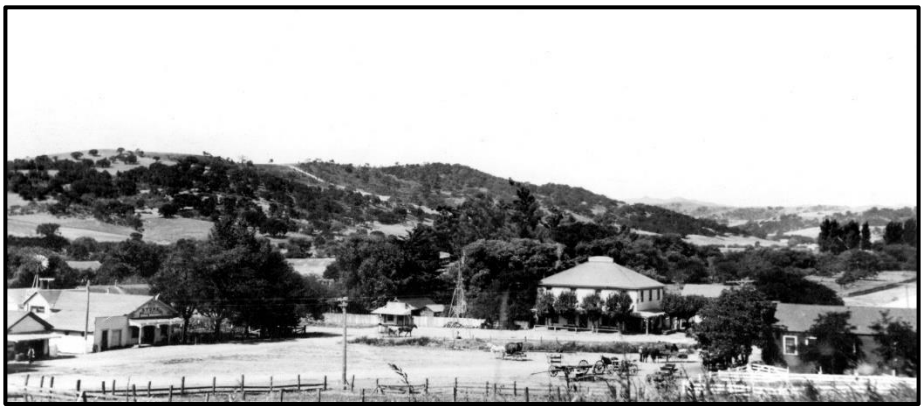
Lafayette, California October 2025 Vol.52, No.4

Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

MT. DIABLO BOULEVARD

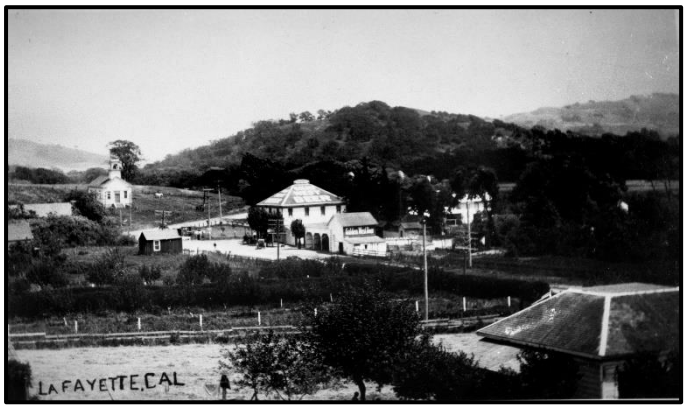
If one street defines Lafayette it is Mt. Diablo Boulevard. It is the reason for our existence and it is our identity as a town.

In this early photo (1869) of what is now Mt. Diablo Boulevard is the wagon that the itinerant photographer used to carry his equipment and develop his pictures. His horse must be grazing somewhere out of sight while he climbed the hill in the west part of town for this picture. Now there are so many trees that this view cannot be duplicated. Downtown is in the large clump of trees. The hill next to the trees has been removed and is where the Plaza Shopping Center is today.



Plaza Park has been central and consistently important to Lafayette ever since Elam and Margaret Brown donated the little patch of land from the Mexican land grant (Rancho Acalanes) in 1864 to be our town center.

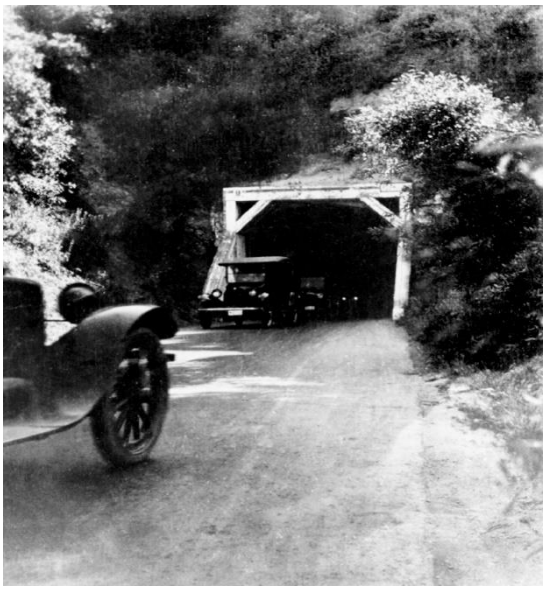
Lafayette grew where the Moraga Road and the Pacheco/Martinez Road met. Since it was also the Road to Oakland, farmers and ranchers sent their goods to the Bay through Lafayette. It was a good stopping place for all, hence the Wayside Inn and a series of hotels were built on the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Elam Brown built a steam powered grist mill on Lafayette Creek behind where today's Park Theater stands. Prior to this, farmers had to take their grain to San Jose to have it ground into flour.

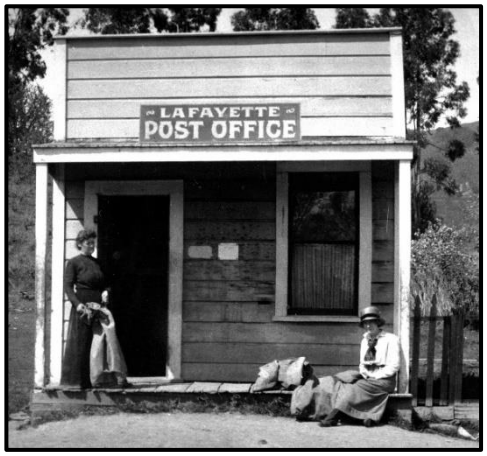


Mt. Diablo Boulevard ran into a hill in the downtown area and detoured around it. Today's Golden Gate Way was that road. In these pictures, the hill can be seen with the Good Templar's Hall, later the first Methodist Church, on it. The hill was first cut through in the late 1930s, and then removed later in the early 1960s to build the Plaza Shopping Center.

The Oakland Road, Tunnel Road, State Route 75A, "the Tunnel Strip", and finally Mt. Diablo Boulevard, were all names for the street, many times interchangeably. Walnut Creek was called The Corners. The corners were where Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Main Street crossed which were then called the Lafayette Road and the Pacheco Road. Orinda was called the Crossroads where Mt. Diablo Boulevard and the road to San Pablo crossed.

The route from the Bay to what is now Contra Costa County was an important route from the time of the Indigenous peoples. The dirt trail climbed the Oakland Hills, descended Fish Ranch Road, and continued east through the Diablo Valley. Since the road to and from the Bay was so well travelled and necessary for commerce, there was a long-standing wish to alleviate the difficulty horses, wagons and early cars had with the climb. The road was narrow, steep and rutted at the best of times, and impassable at others. A tunnel was dug and completed in 1880, but it collapsed. In 1903 a usable tunnel, the Kennedy Tunnel, was opened. It was about 300 feet higher than today's Caldecott and slightly to the south. Mt. Diablo Boulevard was now called Tunnel Road. Cattle were driven through the old tunnel, through Berkeley to the slaughterhouses in Emeryville.





Carrie Hough Van Meter (seen on the left) was the first postmaster after the post office was moved from inside the Pioneer Store. The Post Office was the first library and Carrie the first librarian in Lafayette as she collected 60 books to lend out from the Post Office.

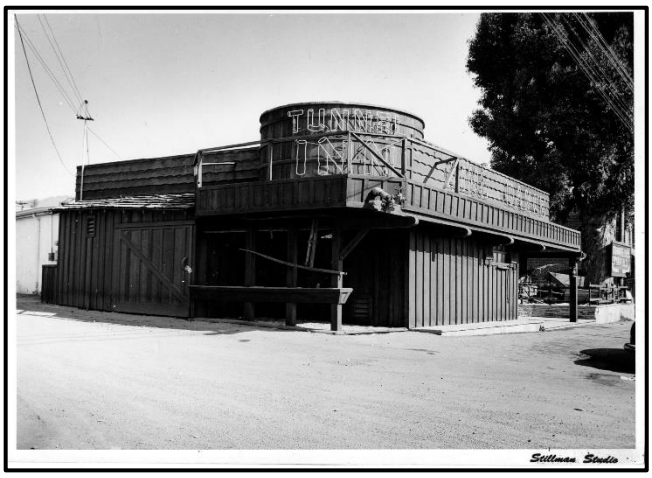
Peter Thomson was the town blacksmith for 50 years. He played a central role in the functioning of the town, making metal tools, square nails, and horse shoes for the local farmers.

Lou's Bar was built in 1935 and was less than half a block from his second bar (the Roundup). Legend has it that Lou welcomed horses into his bar and provided a drink for the rider and a carrot for the horse. Prohibition was repealed in 1933 and other bars then began appearing on Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

M.H. Stanley (after whom the local Middle School is named) owned a drug store on Mt. Diablo Boulevard which he purchased in 1935 and owned for about 15 years. Old timers remember the tuna sandwiches and fresh apple pie sold there.

With the opening of the San Francisco/ Oakland Bay Bridge in 1936 and the Broadway Low Level Tunnel in 1937, hundreds of East Bay residents purchased property in Contra Costa County. Oakland realtor Fred Wood reported that he sold seven home sites in his Moraga Woodlands development in one day. In 1938, half-acre to five-acre lots were available at a beginning price of $1,000. The population of Lafayette (and the traffic on Mt. Diablo Boulevard) greatly increased.

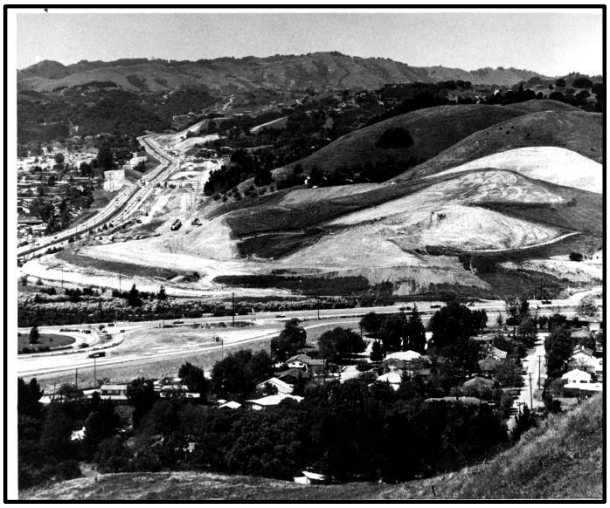
By the 1940s, so many eating, drinking, and dancing establishments were on Mt. Diablo Boulevard that it was called *the Strip* or *the Tunnel Strip*. People came from east and west for an evening's entertainment. At one point, the Lafayette Improvement Club asked the County to stop issuing liquor licenses! In 1950 the *Sun* Newspaper reported that illegal gambling had become common on the Strip. There was even talk (never confirmed) that eastern mobsters were becoming involved in Lafayette. Many restaurants were also located along Mt. Diablo Boulevard in the 1950s.



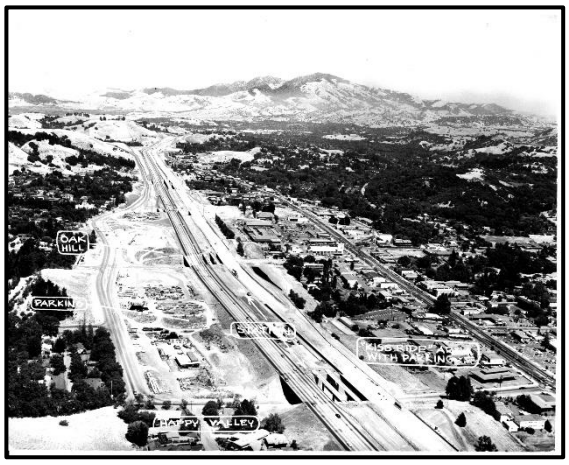
The 1950s were a time of major change. Young men had passed through the Bay Area on their way to the Pacific Theater of World War II and never forgot about the area. After the war, they returned to California. The population exploded. Housing developments sprang up all over Lafayette. The total change from an agricultural community to a suburb took place this decade. Traffic on Mt. Diablo Boulevard became a problem.

This aerial view shows the Pleasant Hill Road intersection on the upper left, the cemetery, Carol Lane in the middle, and Lafayette Orchards in the lower right (the horse shoe shaped road). The building boom had begun.

By the mid-50s it was clear that Mt. Diablo Boulevard could no longer handle all the traffic passing down it daily. One risked life and limb crossing the road. There was no other road from Oakland to points east and those towns, too, were growing.



A bypass was built to take the through traffic off Mt. Diablo Boulevard. A *Freeway Fiesta* was held and crowds turned out for the opening of the bypass. Finally, the bypass was converted to a freeway connecting with others to whisk traffic past. In the 1960s the Plaza Park was renovated. Behind the façade of one of the early stores (Toyland) is today the Sideboard Restaurant. The false front was added in the late 1920s and even after many changes, the old store was still there.



In the 1970s, BART was built down the middle of the freeway. BART had planned to use the old Sacramento Northern Railroad right of way (today the Lafayette/Moraga Trail) but the Lafayette Improvement Association convinced them to put the train between the freeway lanes of Highway 24.

+++ **Laura Torkelson**

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2025

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

Jeff Klurfeld	**Becky Jenkins**	**Carol Ward**
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Diane Barbera	**Molly Gleason**	**Margaret Franz**
Annette Dale	**Matt Rees**	**Marianne Monagle**
Laurel Hill	**John Hughes**	**Andree Hurst**

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. Donations are always appreciated.

Student Membership: $15 ~ Individual Membership: $30 ~ Family Membership: $60

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